CHAPTER III

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

THE ecclesiastical and political controversies which descend from the sixteenth century have thrust into oblivion all issues of less perennial interest. But the discussions which were motived by changes in the texture of society and the relations of classes were keen and continuous, nor was their result without significance for the future. In England, as on the Continent, the new economic realities came into sharp collision with the social theory inherited from the Middle Ages. The result was a re-assertion of the traditional doctrines with an almost tragic intensity of emotion, their gradual retreat before the advance of new conceptions, both of economic organization and of the province of religion, and their final decline from a militant creed into a kind of pious antiquarianism. They lingered, venerable ghosts, on the lips of church-men down to the Civil War. Then the storm blew and they flickered out.

Mediaeval England had lain on the outer edge of economic civilization, remote from the great highways of commerce and the bustling financial centres of Italy and Germany. With the commercial revolution

which followed the Discoveries, a new age began. After the first outburst of curiosity, interest in explorations which yielded no immediate return of treasure died down. It was not till more than half a century later, when the silver of the New World was dazzling all Europe, that Englishmen reflected that it might con-
i;eivably have been lodged in the Tower instead of at "
Seville, and that talk of competition for America and the East began in earnest.